

#152 FLOYD WELCH: ELECTRICIAN'S ABOARD USS *MARYLAND*

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay. I have to read this little thing. The following interview of Floyd Welch was conducted on December 2, 1986, at Honolulu, at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Welch lives at East Lime, Connecticut. And the interview was conducted by Bart Fredo and we will start.

First of all, Mr. Welch, why don't you tell me your name and your hometown.

Floyd Welch (FW): My name is Floyd Welch. I lived about all my life in East Lime, Connecticut.

BF: In 1941, what branch of the service were you in? What was your rank and what job did you have?

FW: In 1941, I was an Electrician's Mate on the USS *Maryland*.

BF: What was your rank?

FW: I was Third Class Electrician['s] [*Mate*] in 1941.

BF: How long had you been in Hawaii prior to the attack?

FW: The exact time is not

BF: Several months or several weeks?

FW: I would say possibly a month or so. We used to come out from Long Beach, being our homeport, each year we would come out to Pearl Harbor for maneuvers. We would have gunnery practice and in those days we also had a landing force made up of the ship's company. Approximately half of the ship would be put into the landing force detail, the other half would stay aboard to man the ship. And we had ground maneuvers, I believe, around Hickam Field somewhere. We would take our undress whites and dye 'em a tan color and it was sort of a mess when it was so hot. The sweat and the dye would run all over you, so we were dyed as well as our clothes.

BF: Let . . .

FW: Yes?

BF: Let me direct your attention to December 7. Where were you early that morning?

FW: That being Sunday, I didn't have any urgent work to do. I was in the washroom, actually. I had taken a shower and was scrubbing up some of my clothes when the alarm went off. It was, let's see, the ship's . . . the fire and rescue alarm went off first. And we all were either running or to our fire and rescue stations, or were there when the second alarm for general quarters went off. And that created quite a turmoil. Some of 'em had already been to their fire and rescue stations, trying to get to the general quarters stations. I had never seen quite such a turmoil before.

BF: Lots of confusion.

FW: Lots of confusion. And I would imagine the majority of us were still thinking this was a drill. Even after we got to our general quarters stations, and were well-manned there, we still thought it was a drill.

BF: Your general quarters station, was that above or below deck?

FW: That was below decks, on the third deck. I was, at that time, in the repair unit. And I did not realize that it was the real thing until I heard them announce to cut the lines from the *OKLAHOMA*.

BF: Now, you were aboard the *MARYLAND* which was tied up at Ford Island?

FW: It was tied up at Ford Island alongside the first quays. The *CALIFORNIA* was ahead of us by itself. Then we were inboard against the quays, the first set, and the *OKLAHOMA* was outboard of us.

BF: You were tied together?

FW: We were tied to the quays and the *OKLAHOMA* was tied to us. And then behind us was the *TENNESSEE* and *WEST VIRGINIA*.

BF: When did you first notice, first realize that it was not a drill?

FW: When the word come over the loudspeakers to cut the lines to the *OKLAHOMA*, that kind of shook it home to me. But still, it didn't really hit home until they asked us, our party, to go topside and help with the rescue of the crew members of the *OKLAHOMA*.

BF: When you went topside, what did you see?

FW: It just was like a dream, almost. The dark smoke and the noise and confusion. We went topside, we were faced toward the *CALIFORNIA*, which was in front of us and went topside, we came up on the starboard side, so that immediately, I did not see the *OKLAHOMA*, 'til I went forward on the fo'c'sle. And I could see she was bottom up.

BF: The *OKLAHOMA* had already capsized?

FW: Had already capsized. Yes. And from then on, our work was just to get the men out of the *OKLAHOMA*.

BF: What kind of a job was that?

FW: For me, it was not as hard a job as those over there burning the holes, and so forth. I helped with the electrical power lines for the lights and so forth. And we did still have false alerts that the enemy was -- the planes were coming over at that time, everybody would scramble from the *OKLAHOMA* and topside and we would get under the barbettes or the turrets, or whatever security we could find. But it was evidently after the last raid that we were up there because I don't recall seeing the planes, but they were very jumpy and would sound those alerts quite frequently.

BF: When you were below decks, at the *MARYLAND*, could you hear the explosions?

FW: Yes. We could hear them very readily, but we didn't, just couldn't make ourselves believe that it was the real thing. We couldn't imagine what they could be doing to cause that much noise.

BF: That must have been quite a shock when you came up topside and saw.

FW: It was. It was.

BF: Anything in particular you can remember about helping to rescue the men from the *OKLAHOMA*?

FW: I haven't thought about too recently. I know that they were very careful. They got the blueprints and went over the hull very carefully so that they would not burn through into a fuel void. And I recall the tappings of the men and their looking on the prints, trying to find what compartments to go through safely to, and where those tappings might be coming from.

BF: While you were doing this, were -- even though the attack apparently was now over -- were there still explosions throughout the harbor? Magazines going up and the like?

FW: I don't recall that there were. There may have been. But due to the excitement, I do not recall any noise like that.

BF: There must have been, it must have been quite a scene to look out over the harbor. How much did you see besides the *OKLAHOMA*? What else could you see?

FW: The motor whale boats were the main thing going back and forth looking for the men that were in the water. The smoke, as I say, was so dense that you could not see very much. And we were wrapped up in the work that we were doing and didn't pay much attention to anything else.

BF: Were you afraid for yourself? Did you fear you were going to die?

FW: That is odd. Not the least bit. I was just almost like a robot, you might say, doing my job and fear didn't enter my mind at all. And I don't think it did to anyone else's. I don't recall anyone even mentioning being afraid.

BF: How would you best describe how you felt? Was it anger, frustration?

FW: No. As I say, just do my job, get those men that needed the help, help them. That was the main thing.

BF: How many would you say the men from the *MARYLAND* saved from the *OKLAHOMA*?

FW: I don't know, really. I . . .

BF: You saw some actually gotten out of the hull, after they . . .

FW: Oh yes. But the number, I never bothered to . . . it was just if there was any tappings there, we wanted to find them, no matter how long or how hard

it took. If we were in their position, we certainly would have wanted the same.

BF: What was it like the rest of the day? What were you doing?

FW: I believe the rest of the day we were working on the *OKLAHOMA*.

BF: Trying to get these men from the . . .

FW: Trying to get the men out. Later, I guess, the next day, I do recall that . . . of course, we had gotten a hit forward. I guess two or three forward. It was flooded forward. But we realized we were stuck there. We were pressed against the quays by the *OKLAHOMA*. And how to get out. We . . . in . . . not -- I don't remember how many days, but it seemed things just passed and there were no days, it seemed. We worked night and day and it was all one. I believe we blasted the quay to relieve the pressure, as I recall now. I'm not sure. And we went from there over to the docks. They put a temporary patch on us with concrete and filled the void with concrete, I believe, and put that temporary patch on and in short order, we were on our way back to Bremerton for repairs.

BF: How long after the attack did you and the *MARYLAND* leave?

FW: It was only two or three weeks, I believe. We were over at one of the piers in the Navy yard, all welding everything, I recall. It was darkened ship; the welding had to be covered with tarps so that there was no light. It worked out fine.

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

BF: Okay, I'd like to put in another tape on this one. That wasn't twenty minutes.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

VIDEOTAPE TWO

FW: Word got by, was passed over the loudspeakers that the *NEVADA* had got underway. Well now, that made things a little better. We seemed to . . . if this was as they said, the real thing, and the *NEVADA* was getting under way, that made things pretty nice. So the first thing we wanted to see was what the *NEVADA* looked like. We had heard she ran aground and so when we did get under way for Bremerton, we, those of us that had the opportunity, were topside to see her.

BF: This was several weeks after the attack?

FW: That was several weeks after the attack.

BF: What about those days immediately following the attack? What did you do? What were those days like?

FW: At the docks at the Navy yard, we were just cleaning up and trying to get shipshape and ready to get under way.

BF: Must have been very busy.

FW: It was very busy. This was new to us, this dock and ship was sort of new, especially in port. We had, of course, practiced docking ship under way many a time, but in port, no lights and in the Navy yard, the . . . they were working just as much at night as they were in the daytime. And not seeing any whites around the Navy yard, it was sort of different.

BF: Did you spend all of your time, then, on the ship, working or . . .

FW: Oh yes.

BF: . . . sleeping?

FW: Yes. I never left the ship, except to go, maybe, for parts over to the shops, or something like that, on an errand.

BF: When did the magnitude of what happened really sink in? The whole attack, when did the important, the significance of that really sink in to you and your shipmates?

FW: I think possibly after the first day, it really sank in. The first day, you were more, or while it was going on, you were just doing your job and not thinking, but later on it did sink in.

Now, to go back just a little bit we did get word too, before we came topside, that there were miniature subs around in the harbor. All of this still really didn't make it the real thing. We just couldn't believe that that was the real thing, even though these words were being passed down to us.

BF: This is when you were below deck?

FW: When we were below deck.

BF: But once you went topside, you must have . . .

FW: It was the real thing.

BF: What stands out more than anything else? Is there one thing that stands out more than anything else about that day? Most viv-- most vivid in your mind.

FW: I think it's just the loss of the men. Those that lost their lives.

BF: Did you lose a lot of friends?

FW: On the ship, we didn't lose so many, no. I don't recall it was many. But we had a lot of friends on other ships. Now, I was movie operator and we would go to the different movie exchange ships for our film. And that way, I got to meet quite a few from the other ships too. So even though -- I mean, what we lost on our ship that day was severe, one life is severe. But we also knew a lot of 'em from the other ships.

BF: Do you have any feelings of animosity towards the Japanese as a result of what you went through?

FW: I don't believe so. They were told what to do. They were carrying out their orders. Those that were in charge may be a little different. But they were doing as we would do. All through the war, we carried our orders out and they carried their orders out. It's those that give the orders where they originate the orders.

BF: You played a small part in a very big event, one of the most important in history, certainly in this century. Has that affected your life in any way, the fact that you were then?

FW: I'm proud of it. I think that's all. I was proud to be a part of it.

BF: Do you think about it a lot?

FW: It comes to mind quite frequently.

BF: And what goes through your mind when it does?

FW: Well, the . . . I enjoyed the work. I would be willing today to go back and do it. They called for volunteers for some of the, putting these new battle-- older battleships back into commission at our last *MARYLAND* reunion. There were quite a few of us that said we would be happy to go back if we could have a few of our old buddies with us. And the only thing is those of us that had the experience are shut out. I believe they won't take 'em after age sixty and most of us have reached sixty-five.

BF: When you see an old movie or something in a book, does it throw you back in time sometimes?

FW: Sometimes it really does. I can just picture, feel and almost smell the work. Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW